

# Praise-Question-Encourage: Guidelines for Writing Teacher-Comments between Essay Drafts

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*By Ellen Lipp and Debbie Davis-Ockey*

For many years while directing a university intensive English program, I worked with experienced writing teachers and graduate student teacher-interns. The teacher-interns had completed some TESL methodology courses but had little or no teaching experience. As a master teacher of new writing teachers, I had the opportunity to help many of them implement process writing as described by Leki (1991) and discussed in greater detail by Reid (1993), Leki (1992), and White and Arndt (1991). These intensive English program writing teachers offered their students topics that were meaningful to them. The teachers taught prewriting techniques, asked students to write multiple drafts of essays, and gave students multiple opportunities for feedback about their drafts-sometimes through peer editing groups, sometimes through written teacher comments and sometimes through one-to-one conferences with the teacher about their drafts. Often these teachers would ask me for advice on how to respond to students' drafts. I found it helpful to give new teachers commenting guidelines on how to respond effectively. I developed these guidelines while working closely with several experienced California State University, Fresno writing teachers and then recently revised them to make observations more effective and efficient. When following the new guidelines, teachers give focused feedback, consisting of several full sentences, in response to preliminary drafts.

In the early 1990s, the guidelines I used reflected the view widely held by process teachers that it is best to comment only about the content of an early draft and only about surface mistakes after the content has been revised. For some writing teachers, helping students with revision (improving the content and organization) and editing (fixing some of the surface errors) will continue to remain separate tasks. However, recent research suggests that feedback between drafts is most effective when teachers comment only on the content (Sheppard 1992) or when teachers write a concentration of content feedback along with a limited amount of grammar, punctuation, and spelling feedback (Leki 1992). This research corresponds with my work with writing teachers and my own classroom experience.

These key points are reflected in the praise-question-encourage guidelines which are written in a form that teachers can easily remember. (See Table 1 below) As the name

suggests, the core of the guidelines consists of praise, question, and encourage (PQE). While the overall guidelines incorporate some ideas from Peitzman and Willingham (1994), the core was inspired by Bennett's praise-question-polish-encourage (PQPE) work with L1 students (1991). The guidelines in Table 1 encourage teachers to comment between drafts, to offer students questions about their writing, and to include comments of praise and encouragement. Teachers can write a series of questions concerning the content, and many of the questions can focus on concepts about writing already discussed in class. When I have offered these guidelines to teachers and TESL practicum students, they have wanted to know the following:

1. How do these guidelines apply insights from recent research?
2. How do teachers apply the guidelines?
3. How do students react to them?

### **How Do the PQE Guidelines Apply Insights from Recent Research on Teacher Commenting between Drafts?**

For an overview of the research on teacher written feedback, readers can refer to Leki's work (1990). A few recent studies have examined the practice of offering content and grammar feedback together. Fathman and Whalley (1990:185) found that "there was almost no difference between content scores on rewrites, when only content feedback was given as opposed to when grammar and content feedback were given at the same time." Lipp (1995) found that when an ESL teacher was trained to follow commenting guidelines, the teacher wrote comments that helped her students revise effectively. More than 90% of her intermediate level students, who received a concentration of content comments along with some grammar comments, earned higher content scores on their rewrites. Both the Lipp as well as the Fathman and Whalley studies focused on intermediate-level ESL students, and data analysis consisted of evaluations of students' early drafts and rewrites.

Ferris (1995) found that even when the program policy discouraged teachers from giving grammar and content/organization feedback in early drafts, students reported getting grammar comments along with content and organization comments. Students surveyed in the study pointed out that they appreciated and applied this teacher written feedback, especially when given feedback between drafts. These studies suggest that between drafts, the comments can emphasize content while including some grammar feedback. These key ideas are incorporated in the guidelines.

In these guidelines, I discourage teachers from giving written feedback primarily about errors even though this practice is very common (Zamel 1985). I have found that when teachers emphasize form in their comments between drafts, many students will rewrite by correcting the surface mistakes and will make few or no other changes. The result is that the students' rewrites become grammar exercises rather than challenges to clarify meaning.

In the guidelines, I have tried to incorporate additional research on teacher- written feedback. Sperling and Freedman (1987) have suggested that a student is more likely to apply teacher feedback effectively when the written comments refer to concepts discussed in class. For example, early in the semester one of the authors of this article in an intermediate-level class focused on the development of ideas in whole class teaching. When she responded to early drafts, she also wrote questions to help students develop their ideas more fully in their essays. As the semester progressed, she focused on other major aspects of writing both in class and in her comments to students.

The guidelines apply additional insights from second language acquisition research. Ellis (1994) reminds us that student motivation is closely linked to language acquisition. To motivate students, the writing teachers in the intensive English program included comments of praise and encouragement in their written feedback. Further, Ellis notes that the teachers' use of referential or open (information seeking) questions "may result in more meaning negotiation and more complex learner output." The writing teachers in the intensive English program included referential questions in their written comments to help students clarify meaning in their rewrites. The commenting guidelines help teachers develop commenting behavior that is consistent with recent research.

## **How Have Teachers Applied These Commenting Guidelines?**

Table 2 below includes a sample student draft, teacher feedback, and the student's rewritten essay. This essay was written in an intermediate-level reading/writing class taught by Davis-Ockey, where the teacher had begun the semester with the theme of describing places. While working with this theme, she discussed how the authors they were reading developed their ideas fully by using examples, descriptive adjectives, and anecdotes. The writing sample shows that the student understood the teacher's comments, applied the teacher's comments, and produced a rewrite with improved content. (See Table 3 below) The portions in the Table 3 which are underlined indicate additions in direct response to the teacher's suggestions provided in Table 2. For example lines marked 2b provide much more information about blowfish, as

suggested by comment 1a, while lines marked 1b describe the bridge and shrine as suggested by comment 1b. The student provides additional information about the location of the town in lines marked 2a. The revised essay is not only longer, but indicates a greater sensitivity to the reader questions which directly asked for supporting detail.

## **How Do Students Respond to Written Comments Based on These Guidelines?**

In addition to wanting to see how teachers apply the guidelines, new teachers often ask me how students respond. Students' reaction to this feedback was positive. In journals students wrote as follows:

"When I rewrite,.Debbie (the teacher) gives me suggestion, and I add some new ideas."

"I think Debbie's comments helped me very much, also could improve my essay and I think I'll do better than first one."

Given the students' positive reactions to the feedback and the effectiveness of the feedback, i.e., students' rewrites were consistently better in content (Lipp 1995), I would encourage teachers to apply the PQE commenting guidelines. The PQE guidelines encourage teachers to write a series of focused content comments while limiting the number of grammar, punctuation, and spelling comments. I have found that teachers following these guidelines are able to give students effective written feedback between drafts even when they have large composition classes.

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## Table 1

### **PQE Guidelines for Commenting on Essay Drafts**

*Getting ready to write comments about a preliminary draft-*

Plan to be selective. Think about what you have emphasized in class. Plan to write comments that emphasize a major concept about writing covered in class.

Plan to be supportive in tone. Comment as a genuinely interested reader not as a judge (Zamel 1985). Begin each comment with the student's

name

(e.g., Julio).

Skim the entire paper before writing comments.

*Using a praise, question, encourage framework (PQE) when commenting-*

PRAISE. Praise a major strength in the paper (be specific when giving praise,

e.g., what was good about the development?)

QUESTION. List text-specific questions to help the student address major weaknesses, and offer a suggestion or strategy after the question to guide the student.

ENCOURAGE. Close with encouragement and/or praise, e.g., encourage by telling the student you enjoyed learning about the topic of the essay.

*Checking and revising your written comments-*

Check that your comments make sense to you; edit where needed.

Check that you have included at least one comment of praise and/or encouragement with each student's comments. Add such comments if needed.

Check that you wrote more comments about content/organization than about surface errors.

## Table 2

*My native City*

*Makiko Nishimori*

*2-19-93*

*I am from Shimonoseki city. Shimonoseki is located in Southern Japan, and it's a small city, but it's the biggest city in my prefecture. My prefecture is Yamaguchi. Shimonoseki's climate is mild and humid because Japan has four seasons. Shimonoseki is quiet and nice place. And its famous for [1:blowfish]. There are Kanmon [1:bridge], some temples [1:and] shrines, museums and aquarium, and so on. But there is only one department store in Shimonoseki. People like to play sports, go shopping, go fishing, climb mountain. Anyway Shimonoseki is a [2:"fish"] town.*

### ***Teacher Comments***

Makiko,

Your city sounds very interesting. I have some ideas to help you revise your essay and add more details to it.

1. Can you explain this idea more? I don't know anything about blowfish. Do they catch them there? What do they use them for? Also, can you give more details about the bridge and the temples? What do they look like?

2. I think your town must be next to a lake or ocean, but you didn't say so. Can you describe the location of your town more. Why is it a "fish" town? That sounds very interesting, but I would like to know more about it. If your town has only one department store, it must be very small. Do you like living in a small town?

I am looking forward to learning more about your city.

### Table 3

*My native City*

*Makiko Nishimori*

*I am from Shimonoseki city. Shimonoseki is located on Southern Japan [2a:and it borders on the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Japan.] Shimonoseki is a small city, but its the biggest city in my prefecture. My prefecture is Yamaguchi. Shimonoseki climate is mild and humid, because Japan has fours seasons. Shimonoseki is quiet and nice place [1a:which is surrounded by nature. I like living in Shimonoseki.] And its famous for blowfish. [2b:Blowfish is catched Haedomari in Shimonoseki. Haedomari is known throughout the country as one of the fishing grounds of blowfish. Blowfish is very expensive and delicious fish. They're fish which turn whitish and taste light. Even the local people can't eat so much, because they are so expensive. They look like swelled cheek and have acupuncture all over the body. Also, they are poisonous. So when we cook blowfish, we need license for cooking blowfish. Shimonoseki is also good fishing grounds for fresh fish in addition to blowfish. That's why people call] Shimonoseki "fish" town. And there are Kanomn bridge, some temples and shrines, museums and aquarium, and so on. [1b:Kanmon bridge connects Shimonoseki with Moji. It's about 700 meters long. And there is the Akama shrine near the Kanmon bridge. It's very beautiful shrine which has bright red tile-roofed]. There is only one big department store in Shimonoseki. People like to play sports, go shopping, go fishing, climb mountain. [2c:I think Shimonoseki is good place to live.]*